

Introducing COBRAs

Exploring motivations for brand-related social media use

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Social media websites such as Facebook, YouTube and Twitter provide unlimited means for internet users to interact, express, share and create content about anything, including brands. Such consumers' online brand-related activities (COBRAs) have significant consequences for firms. To effectively anticipate and direct these consequences, understanding people's motivations to engage in brand-related social media use is imperative. This article makes a first effort to come to such an understanding. Instant messaging (IM) interviews were conducted with people engaged in COBRAs about their motivations to do so. Reporting motivations for the full spectrum of COBRA types (consuming, contributing and creating), the authors provide marketers and brand managers with valuable insights into consumer behaviour in a social media-dominated era.

Introduction

The rise of Web 2.0 technologies has led to a wealth of social media websites, popular examples of which are YouTube, Twitter and Facebook. These platforms provide many opportunities for internet users to share and create content about anything, including brands. Social media have thereby transformed online consumer behaviour (Kaplan & Haenlein 2010), which has important consequences for firms, products and brands. Depending more and more on each other than on companies for information, consumers are becoming increasingly influential with respect to the brands they are interacting about (Muñiz & Schau 2007; Cova & Dallı 2009). Moreover, their interactions with and about brands have a much stronger impact on consumer behaviour than traditional forms of marketing and advertising (e.g. Chiou & Cheng 2003; Villanueva *et al.* 2008).

Scientists, advertisers and marketers who wish to keep pace with these 'new forms of customer empowerment' (Cova & Pace 2006) face the challenge of developing a good understanding of the appeal that such brand-related interactions have for their target consumers.

Watching brand-related videos on Absolut Vodka's YouTube channel, talking about IKEA on Twitter and uploading pictures of their new Converse sneakers to Facebook are examples of consumers' online brand-related activities (COBRAs). We use this COBRA concept as a behavioural construct that provides a unifying framework to think about consumer activity pertaining to brand-related content on social media platforms. Under its sign, a wide range of consumer-to-consumer and consumer-to-brand behaviours are clustered. As such, it conjoins concepts that describe idiosyncratic online behavioural phenomena. For instance, 'electronic word-of-mouth' (eWOM) is associated with online consumer-to-consumer interactions about brands, and the term 'user-generated content' (UGC) is used for the content produced and uploaded by consumers rather than companies. Moreover, the COBRA concept also encompasses early typologies of consumer behaviour in computer-mediated environments, such as Hoffman and Novak's (1996) distinction between experience- and goal-orientated activities – for instance, internet surfing and online shopping respectively. Enveloping these concepts and the social media-based brand-related behaviours they cover, then, the COBRA concept allows us to collectively investigate and compare behaviours that were previously investigated only separately.

While the impact of COBRAs on consumer perceptions and behaviour is subject to an increasing number of studies (e.g. Shang *et al.* 2006; Duana *et al.* 2008; Lee & Youn 2009), it is also important to examine COBRAs' antecedents – in particular consumers' motivations for engaging with brand-related content on social media (cf. Rodgers *et al.* 2007). In the context of media use, motivations are understood as the incentives that drive people's selection and use of media and media content (Rubin 2002). They have been shown to influence website effectiveness, attitudes towards brands and advertisements, and purchase behaviour (Rodgers 2002; Ko *et al.* 2005). To date, however, people's motivations to engage in COBRAs have been scarcely investigated (Burmam 2010). In addition, no study has examined COBRAs and their motivations in the context of other COBRAs. Consequently, we lack an overview of motivations for

the full spectrum of brand-related social media uses, and we need such an overview to fully understand and anticipate consumers' online brand-related activities.

The aim of our study was to provide a first, comprehensive understanding of consumers' motivations for brand-related use of social media. In this article, we first present our COBRAs typology. We then move on to the results of the instant messaging (IM) based interviews we carried out in order to classify COBRA motivations. We close with a discussion on how our findings relate to the literature on motivations for both general social media and consumers' online brand-related activities.

A COBRA typology

To facilitate the exploration of COBRA motivations, a COBRA typology was developed. Existing typologies of online consumer behaviour usually categorise behaviours into various user types that are associated with specific behaviours. For instance, Mathwick (2002) developed four internet user types, namely lurkers, socialisers, personal connectors and transactional community members. While lurkers observe other people's conducts and contributions on online communities, socialisers engage with other people, provide feedback and maintain relationships with family, friends and other acquaintances. User typologies have also been applied to social media. Li and Bernoff (2008) for instance distinguish six types of social media users: inactives, spectators, joiners, collectors, critics and creators.

User typologies, however, are limited in the sense that people often engage in multiple roles. That is (applying Mathwick's typology), depending on his or her motivations and goals, someone can be a lurker at a given moment, and seconds later be a socialiser. While user typologies thus are oversimplifications of reality, typologies that classify behaviour into usage types are not, because they assume people to engage in more than a single behaviour. However, usage typologies are far less common than user typologies, especially when it comes to social media. An exception is Shao's (2009) theoretically derived typology of generic social media use. Similar to Shao, we took the activeness of social media use into account and developed a continuum from high to low brand-related activity. COBRAs were categorised into three dimensions that correspond to a

path of gradual involvement with brand-related content on social media, namely consuming, contributing and creating. These dimensions form the basic units of analysis in our study (see Table 1 for several examples).

Table 1: COBRA typology as a continuum of three usage types – consuming, contributing and creating

COBRA type	Examples of brand-related social media use		
Level of brand related-activeness ↓ Consuming	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Viewing brand-related video • Listening to brand-related audio • Watching brand-related pictures • Following threads on online brand community forums • Reading comments on brand profiles on social network sites • Reading product reviews • Playing branded online videogames • Downloading branded widgets • Sending branded virtual gifts/cards 		
	Contributing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rating products and/or brands • Joining a brand profile on a social network site • Engaging in branded conversations, e.g. on online brand community forums or social network sites • Commenting on brand-related weblogs, video, audio, pictures, etc. 	
		Creating	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Publishing a brand-related weblog • Uploading brand-related video, audio, pictures or images • Writing brand-related articles • Writing product reviews

Note: this list of examples of brand-related social media use is not exhaustive – COBRAs come in countless forms. The examples mentioned are both literature (e.g. Li & Bernoff 2008) and author generated.

Consuming brand-related content

The consuming COBRA type represents a minimum level of online brand-related activeness. It denotes participating without actively contributing to or creating content. People who consume watch the brand-related videos that companies or other people create, and view the product ratings and reviews that others post, and the dialogues between members of online brand forums. In addition, they download branded widgets, play branded games and send branded virtual gifts.

Contributing to brand-related content

The contributing COBRA type is the middle level of online brand-related activeness. It denotes both user-to-content and user-to-user interactions about brands. People who contribute to brand-related content converse on a brand's fan page on a social networking site, make contributions to brand forums, and comment on blogs, pictures, videos and any other brand-related content that others have created.

Creating brand-related content

The creating COBRA type represents the ultimate level of online brand-related activeness. It denotes actively producing and publishing the brand-related content that others consume and contribute to. People that create write brand-related weblogs, post product reviews, produce and upload branded videos, music and pictures, or write articles on brands.

Uses, gratifications and motivations

In our endeavour to understand the appeal of COBRAs for consumers, we took a user-centric functionalist perspective on social media: uses and gratifications (U&G). As opposed to effect-orientated research traditions that take the view of the communicator, the U&G approach to communication research examines media effects from the viewpoint of the individual user (Aitken *et al.* 2008). Rather than being used to examine what the media do to people, U&G has been employed to examine how and why people use media (Katz 1959; Katz *et al.* 1974). Because U&G assumes that people are active and selective in their media use, it is still considered a cutting-edge approach for investigating the internet as well as social media use, as both compel the active participation of their users (Eighmey 1997; Ruggiero 2000).

U&G researchers usually speak of motivations when describing why people consume certain media and what satisfactions they eventually receive thereof (e.g. Rubin 1984; Ko *et al.* 2005; Choi *et al.* 2009). However, it has not always been clear what constituted a motivation in U&G research, and the lack of a clear definition of a key concept has probably added to the criticism that U&G has received for having a 'vague conceptual frame-

work and a lack of precision in major concepts' (Ruggiero 2000, p. 4). U&G researchers have dealt with such criticism by establishing a line of research that aligns more with other research traditions, and differentiates between antecedents and consequences of media behaviour. While antecedents of behaviour are referred to as 'gratifications sought', consequences of behaviour are referred to as 'gratifications obtained' (Rubin 2002). In addition to this, U&G's assumption of media use as goal directed reflects thinking among psychologists and communication researchers of behaviour as goal directed (cf. Kleinginna & Kleinginna 1981). Widely recognised as the key driving forces behind behaviour (Dichter 1964; Joinson 2003), motivations here are understood as gratifications sought: if media behaviour is a means to attain a goal (i.e. gratifications obtained), then motivation is the activation of that goal-directed behaviour (Pervin 1989).

Social media use motivations

U&G is particularly appropriate for examining people's use of new types of media and content (e.g. Newhagen & Rafaeli 1996; Ruggiero 2000). Since the arrival of social media in the early days of the 21st century, U&G researchers have examined how and why people use this new medium type. This has led to a body of literature on the motivations of various social media uses. For instance, Bumgarner (2007) and Boyd (2008) examined motivations for using social networking sites, while Dholakia *et al.* (2004) studied motivations for virtual community participation, and Kaye (2007) explored people's motivations to blog.

As new media and new content genres continue to emerge, and as each U&G study yields its own schemes and terms for classifying motivations (Katz *et al.* 1973), the list of media motivations and U&G categories carries on expanding (Barton 2009). Many motivation classifications have been developed for many media, genres and programmes. One of the earliest, if not *the* earliest, dates back to 1948, as Lasswell posited that media serve three functions: surveillance of the environment, correlation of the components of society and transmission of social heritage. This classification of why people attend to media has been refined, updated and revised many times. Today, the most cited and widely recognised U&G categorisation is that of McQuail *et al.* (1972), who distinguish four gratification categories: diversion, personal relationships, personal identity and surveillance.

McQuail's 1983 categorisation is an updated version that takes precedent literature into account. Although the category labels have undergone slight changes, no great changes have been made to content: entertainment, integration and social interaction, personal identity and information. These motivations usually cover several second-order motivations. Entertainment, for instance, covers motivations such as enjoyment and relaxation. These are called 'sub-motivations'.

McQuail's (1983) four-category classification of motivations for general media use has been found relevant and applicable to modern-day media use, including the internet (e.g. Bronner & Neijens 2006; Calder & Malthouse 2008; Calder *et al.* 2009; Malthouse & Calder 2010). In addition, several social media motivations studies show that McQuail's classification is also applicable to social media. They are discussed below, together with two extra motivations that emerged from general social media motivations literature and that do not correspond with any of the entertainment, integration and social interaction, personal identity, or information motivations: remuneration and empowerment.

Entertainment

The entertainment motivation covers several media gratifications that are related to escaping or being diverted from problems or routine; emotional release or relief; relaxation; cultural or aesthetic enjoyment; passing time; and sexual arousal. Entertainment has been mentioned by many social media U&G researchers as an overall motivation – that is, not specified into sub-motivations such as relaxation or escapism. For instance, Shao (2009) found it to be a relevant motivation for consuming user-generated content, and Sangwan (2005) and Park *et al.* (2009) found that participation in a virtual community or social networking site respectively is partly driven by entertainment as well. As an example of aesthetic enjoyment, Kaye (2007) found certain blog characteristics to be drivers of people's engagement with social media, while Courtois *et al.* (2009) found relaxation and escapism to be important drivers of uploading content.

Integration and social interaction

The integration and social interaction motivation covers various media gratifications that are related to other people. Examples of sub-motivations are gaining a sense of belonging; connecting with friends, family and

society; seeking support/emotional support; and substituting real-life companionship. Several social media researchers have identified motivations that correspond with McQuail's description. For instance, Kaye (2007) speaks of 'affiliation with like-minded others' when investigating blogging motivations; Boyd (2008) found social identification to play a major role in people's contributions to social networking sites; and Daugherty *et al.* (2008) found that social interaction was an important motivator of creating user-generated content.

Personal identity

The personal identity motivation covers media gratifications that are related to the self. Sub-motivations include, for instance, gaining insight into one's self; reinforcing personal values; and identifying with and gaining recognition from peers. Personal identity-related motivations are abundant in social media motivations literature. For instance, Boyd (2008) and Bumgarner (2007) respectively identified impression management and identity expression as important motivators of using social networking sites; Papacharissi (2007) discovered that writing a weblog is driven by a need for self-fulfilment; and Nov (2007) found that people who contribute to Wikipedia are motivated by the opportunities for self-enhancement that this generates.

Information

The information motivation covers several information-related media gratifications. Sub-motivations include, for instance, surveying what relevant events and conditions are taking place in someone's direct daily environment and in society; seeking advice and opinions; and risk reduction. The information motivation is abundantly present in social media motivations literature. Often mentioned are opinion and advice seeking (Wang & Fesenmaier 2003; Kaye 2007), information exchange (Ridings & Gefen 2004), voyeurism (Bumgarner 2007) and surveillance (Courtois *et al.* 2009). Most studies, however, just mention 'information' when discussing this motivation (e.g. Sangwan 2005; Park *et al.* 2009).

Remuneration

Several social media motivations studies have found remuneration to be a driver of, especially, contributing to online communities. Remuneration

as a motivation involves people engaging in social media use because they expect to gain some kind of future reward – be it economic incentives (e.g. money or a prize) (Wang & Fesenmaier 2003), job-related benefits (Nov 2007), or personal wants such as specific software (Hars & Ou 2001).

Empowerment

The empowerment motivation refers to people using social media to exert their influence or power on other people or companies. Wang and Fesenmaier (2003), for instance, found that ‘enforcing service excellence’ is a driver of participation in online travel communities, while Kaye (2007) found that people read political blogs to check whether broadcast media report events accurately.

COBRA motivations

While the previously described social media motivation studies are certainly of great value for understanding general social media use, they do not explicitly address brand-related social media use. The question thus remains whether the motivations that hold for generic social media use also hold for consumers’ online brand-related activities (COBRAs). While some of the above-mentioned motivations are present in the (relatively small) body of brand-related social media motivations literature (for instance, Hennig-Thurau and Walsh (2003) found that reading customer reviews is in part driven by a need for information; Hsu and Liao (2007) discovered that community feelings motivate participation in brand communities; and Berthon *et al.* (2008) found that personal identity motivates the creation of user-generated advertisements), these studies only investigated the motivations for individual brand-related social media behaviours. That is, in studying the motivations for specific COBRAs (e.g. consuming reviews), the motivations for other COBRAs (e.g. creating brand-related video) were not taken into account. Because there is no overview of motivations for the full spectrum of brand-related social media uses, and because of the predominantly quantitative nature of the existing studies, we could not unambiguously state that (1) different COBRAs are driven by different motivations and (2) all motivations for COBRAs have been discovered.

Research method

Unstructured interviewing via IM

To answer these questions, we needed a research method that would enable us to explore the unique motivational patterns that govern varying COBRA-levels without preconceptions. Moreover, this research method should allow us to systematically analyse data and compare our findings to the pre-existing knowledge on motivations for various social media-based behaviours.

Unstructured, open-ended interviews meet these criteria and gave us the latitude to build up an inclusive and potentially new understanding of COBRA motivations (Miles & Huberman 1994; Strauss & Corbin 1998). Characterised as conversations between peers (Burgess 1980, in Silverman 2006), unstructured interviews can generate rich and meaningful data and deliver valuable insights into consumer behaviour (Tadajewski 2006; Gruber *et al.* 2008). While quantitative methods or qualitative interviewing using a fixed interviewing protocol may fail to reveal hidden motivations (Tadajewski 2006), unstructured interviews are less likely to. They give greater depth than other research techniques (Silverman 2006), because they allow researchers to explore ‘the reasons behind the reasons’ (Gengler *et al.* 1999, p. 75) of specific conducts. Furthermore, we assumed that people are well able to elaborate on their motivations to engage in specific behaviours. This method therefore dovetailed with our study’s theoretical basis, namely uses and gratifications. As Katz *et al.* (1973/1974, p. 511) state: ‘people are sufficiently self-aware to be able to report their interests and motives in particular cases, or at least to recognise them when confronted with them in an intelligible and familiar verbal formulation’. Thus, we believed that we could gain in-depth, comprehensive, and, possibly, new insights into people’s motivations to engage with brands on social media by interviewing people.

The interviews were conducted online using an instant messaging (IM) application, which is a feasible method of data collection (Stieger & Göritz 2006; Hussain & Griffiths 2009; Jansz & Theodorsen 2009). IM is text-based chat software that enables the synchronous exchange of messages. It is cheap to administer, easy to use, and convenient in that interviews are automatically transcribed and interviewees do not have to leave their

homes or offices. McKenna and Bargh's (2000, p. 62) statement that 'under the protective cloak of anonymity users can express the way they truly feel and think' is applicable to IM. That is, the physical distance between the interviewer and the interviewee prevents social desirability biases and, compared to face-to-face contexts, IM encourages people to reveal more personal information and to express themselves uninhibitedly (O'Connor & Madge 2003; Gruber *et al.* 2008). The IM application we used was developed especially for this study and was hosted on the university website, since an academic environment may enhance the interviewer's trustworthiness (Huggins & Glebbeek 2003).

Interviews were conducted according to Silverman's (2006, p. 112) guidelines for qualitative interviewing. We conducted a pilot study ($N = 5$) to test our IM application and practise our interviewing routine. The interviewees (three females, two males, $M_{\text{age}} = 31$, $SD = 8.12$) had little trouble verbalising their motivations. In a face-to-face setting after the pilot interviews, they indicated that the IM module was easy to operate and encouraged them to answer comfortably, elaborately and without reserve. In addition, all positively valued both the interviewing method and the way the interviews were set up and carried out.

Interviewees and procedure

Participants were recruited in the Netherlands, which has one of the highest internet penetration rates in the world (88.6%) (Internetworldstats.com 2010) and hosts many heavily visited social media venues. Because of the exploratory character of our research, we recruited interviewees from a wide variety of both consumer-initiated and company-initiated social media venues (a weblog such as Nintendofacts.nl is initiated and controlled by a Nintendo fan – the company has no control over content, appearance and the like; Adidas's fan page on Hyves – the Netherlands' largest social networking site – is initiated and controlled by the company itself). The interviewees represented various age and gender categories, and engaged with a wide variety of brands. The venues were identified through extensive internet searches and by keeping up with Dutch marketing weblogs. To ensure that we would be dealing with the latest COBRAs, a venue was selected if it met at least one of two requirements: it had to show active participation and/or be part of a current marketing

campaign. For the first requirement, we selected only those venues at which there had been activity within a maximum of 14 days prior to the start of data collection. To avoid the need to obtain parental consent, we set the minimum age limit of interviewees at 16. We posted invitations in which we asked people to respond if they had ever consumed, contributed or created brand-related content, and actively approached people who had consumed, contributed or created brand-related content. Potential interviewees were offered the prospect of winning a €25 (\$33) incentive. As a result of this recruitment method, our interviewees were people who engaged with brands on brand profiles on social networking sites, online brand communities, customer review sites and brand-related weblogs.

When someone agreed to take part in our study, we made an appointment to meet online. At the arranged date and time, the participant would go to the website that hosted the IM module, where he or she would see a picture of the interviewer alongside a brief exposé of the research. In order to avoid possible bias, we did not mention the exact purpose of the interview. After filling in his or her name, the interviewee entered the virtual interview room and the interview began.

The interviews that provided the final data were conducted between 1 April and 11 June 2009, and lasted between 45 and 90 minutes. All interviewees engaged in more than one COBRA. For instance, people who primarily consume brand-related content occasionally also create brand-related content, and vice versa. Consequently, each interview usually yielded motivational statements on more than one COBRA type. We kept interviewing new people until theoretical and data saturation were reached – that is, until we were confident that further data collection would not add new motivations (Gruber *et al.* 2008; Sandelowski 2008). We interviewed 20 people, which is generally considered enough to reach data saturation (see Onwuegbuzie & Collins 2007, p. 289). The interviewees were between 16 and 47 years of age (55% male, $M_{\text{age}} = 28.10$, $SD = 9.09$).

Analysis of interview transcripts

The interview texts were transformed from instant messaging protocols into word-processing documents. We then content analysed the interview

transcripts using two coders who were familiar with content analysis procedures (cf. Brandtzæg & Heim 2009). They individually read all the original interview transcripts and carefully tracked them on motivational statements. A motivational statement can be found in a single word, a sentence or fraction thereof, or even an entire paragraph. Each statement was then coded according to its correspondence to the motivation information, personal identity, integration and social interaction, entertainment, remuneration and empowerment; extensive descriptions of each motivation and the sub-motivations they cover were provided (Miles & Huberman 1994; Strauss & Corbin 1998; Silverman 2006).

When interviewees mentioned motivations that did not correspond with any of the social media motivations derived from literature, these were labelled as new. Statements that displayed more than one motivation were coded twice, and sometimes three times. For instance, one interviewee (male, 28) said that he visits a virtual brand community 'to relax and pass time, just sitting comfortably in front of my laptop and watching what's happening on the site'. From this statement coders deduced both an entertainment motivation ('relax and pass time') and an information motivation ('what's happening') (cf. Berthon *et al.* (2008, p. 12), who state that people often have a combination of motivations for a single behaviour).

As one coder was unfamiliar with U&G and motivation literature, and the research's framework a priori, the coding procedure was objective and data driven (Miles & Huberman 1994). After coding all the interviews, the coders jointly resolved the few coding disagreements (9 from a total of 189 statements; 4.67%), all of which related to the distinctiveness of some of the motivations/sub-motivations. For instance, coders initially disagreed on the motivations expressed in the following statement: 'I like sharing information and informing people about brands, products, events and sales actions.' While one coder had allocated this statement to the sub-motivations social interaction ('sharing') and enjoyment ('like'), the other had additionally coded it as an empowerment motivation ('informing people'). After discussion, the coders agreed to include all three sub-motivations. In this manner, coders eventually reached full agreement on all coding decisions.

Results

Throughout the interviews, a pattern emerged as to people's motivations to consume, contribute to and create brand-related content on social media. In accordance with our COBRA typology, we discuss these patterns per COBRA type, starting with the lowest level of brand-related activeness. The order in which we discuss the motivations within each COBRA type is arbitrary. It should be noted that certain motivations go beyond a single COBRA type. Entertainment, for instance, was found to drive not only consuming, but also contributing and creating. Table 2 presents a graphic display of our findings.

Table 2: Motivations per COBRA type

COBRA type	Motivations										
	Information				Personal identity			Integration and social interaction			
	Surv	Know	Prep	Insp	Sfex	Sfpr	Sass	Sint	Soid	Help	Sopr
Consuming	ac	abc	bc	c	a				b		b
Contributing	a	a			ac	ac	abc	abc	abc	abc	
Creating	a	a			abc	abc	abc	abc	ac	ab	

COBRA type	Motivations						
	Entertainment				Empowerment		Remuneration
	Enjy	Relx	Past	Escp			
Consuming	abc	ac	c	c		a	bc
Contributing	abc	c	a			a	a
Creating	abc	a	c			bc	ab

Note: Surv = surveillance; Know = knowledge; Prep = pre-purchase information; Insp = inspiration; Sfex = self-expression; Sfpr = self-presentation; Sass = self-assurance; Sint = social interaction; Soid = social identity; Help = helping; Sopr = social pressure; Enjy = enjoyment; Relx = relaxation; Escp = escapism; Past = pastime.
a = Motivation identified in prior general social media use motivation studies. b = Motivation identified in prior brand-related social media use motivation studies. c = Motivation identified in this study.

Motivations for consuming brand-related content

The consuming COBRA type is driven by three motivations – information, entertainment and remuneration – some of which cover several sub-motivations.

Information

Information is an important motivation for people to consume brand-related content. People go online to search for the technical specifications of a Volkswagen car, scrutinise Adidas's latest shoe collection, read about other people's experiences with Zwitsal baby products, or check what events and parties Bacardi is organising. Information covers four sub-motivations: surveillance, knowledge, pre-purchase information and inspiration.

Surveillance stands for observing and staying updated about one's social environment. What's going on in the online brand community? How have others 'pimped' their cars? For instance, one interviewee (male, 33) said that he looks at other people's pictures on the Alfa Romeo brand page on Hyves (a Dutch social networking site) to find out 'what Alfa they own, and how many ugly spoilers they have glued onto it'. Another interviewee (female, 38) became a member of Ben & Jerry's fan page on Hyves because 'I hope to be kept up to date with the latest developments ... New tastes, shops, campaigns ...'. Thus, by consuming brand-related content, people observe their brand-related social environment: what's new, what's going on, what's 'hip and happening', and what others do with or think of a certain brand.

Knowledge straightforwardly denotes people consuming brand-related information to profit from other people's knowledge and expertise in order to learn more about a product or brand. As one interviewee (male, 45) mentioned, his brand community's forum 'unlocks a gold mine of knowledge about Sonos [an audio system]'. Another interviewee (male, 39) explained why he had joined Volkswagen's online brand community: 'projects like enlarging brakes, or what brakes of other cars are suited for your car, and how you engineer that, that kind of stuff, and all the information you can't find or don't know, is explained or sorted out at the forum, all of us together, really'.

Pre-purchase information refers to reading product reviews or threads on brand communities in order to make well-considered buying decisions. One interviewee (female, 25) in that respect highlighted the objective nature of information on review sites: 'to make good buying decisions, like, that you are aware of a product's pros and cons ... and to get access to information that otherwise would be very difficult to obtain, because it's

biased by salesmen'. In line with this may be a need to reduce the risk of buying 'a pig in a poke'. One interviewee (male, 31) said: 'I have specific demands, and when a product meets these and the reviews are generally good, then it cannot be a bad buy.'

Inspiration stands for people consuming brand-related information to 'get new ideas – like a source of inspiration, so to speak' (female, 25). Consumers view pictures of other people's cars to get inspiration for pin-striping their own cars, and look at pictures of other people's shoes to get ideas about what shoes to wear themselves: 'if I'm looking for new shoes, then I'll check it [the Converse fan page on Hyve] to see if there are nice ones around' (female, 16).

Entertainment

The entertainment motivation is present in all three COBRA types. For consuming brand-related content, it covers the motivations enjoyment, relaxation and pastime.

Enjoyment as a motivation denotes consuming brand-related content because people 'just enjoy being on the Björn Borg Hyve' (male, 17), 'enjoy seeing what others are doing with their cars' (female, 20) or 'just like watching what other people do with and think about HEMA [a Dutch department store chain]' (male, 47). As straightforward as this may sound, enjoyment often interacts with other motivations, as illustrated by the interviewee (female, 25) who stated that: 'then I started to actually like playing the game; so, I initially played to win a trip, but I finished it because I thought it was amusing'. Here, enjoyment clearly interplays with the remuneration motivation.

The relaxation motivation stands for consuming brand-related content as a means to unwind from everyday life. As one respondent (male, 29), a member of the Volkswagen brand community, stated: 'Of course every once in a while I use the site to relax or pass the time. I just set myself comfortably in front of my laptop and watch what's going on out there.'

Pastime refers to browsing a brand profile on a social networking site 'mainly because I'm bored' (female, 16). Another interviewee (male, 31) stated that although 'I read some messages on the iPod Hyves about the headset guarantee', he was not actually looking for that information: 'I was bored, went on Hyves and accidentally stumbled upon that message.'

Remuneration

Prior research indicates that brand-related online activities may be partly driven by prospects of money, job-related benefits or other rewards (e.g. Hennig-Thurau *et al.* 2004). The remuneration motivation was mentioned once during our interviews. The interviewee (female, 25) said that she had played a social media-based video game released by the Crystal Clear soft drink company as part of an advertising campaign, because she may have won an adventurous trip to Nepal.

Motivations for contributing to brand-related content

The contributing COBRA type is driven by three distinct motivations – personal identity, integration and social interaction, and entertainment – some of which cover several sub-motivations.

Personal identity

Personal identity involves several self-related and identity-related motivations, and is found to be a driver of both the contributing and the creating COBRA type. Regarding contributing to brand-related content, it covers three sub-motivations: self-presentation, self-expression and self-assurance.

The self-presentation motivation refers to people contributing to brand-related content in order to provide others with an image of their personality. For instance, an interviewee (male, 29) said that he had joined the Heineken fan page on Hyves in order to show others that he is the kind of person who ‘prefers beer to water’. Another interviewee contributed to the Illy coffee fan page on Hyves so that others can form an image of him and his interests: ‘Consider it as part of the presentation, to exclaim that you’re an Illy lover.’ He additionally stated that he occasionally receives invitations to become a member of other brand-related Hyves pages: ‘some invitations I’ll accept, others I’ll throw away; it depends on whether I want to be associated with that specific brand’.

A brand can also be used to express and shape one’s identity and/or personality: who you are and what you stand for. Self-expression motivations are reflected in statements such as ‘Puma matches me’ (female, 20) and ‘Volkswagen is a way of life’ – by which the interviewee (male, 39)

articulates that the brand had become an important part of his life and, therefore, his identity. Another interviewee (female, 25) stated: ‘Those Hyves pages describe who I am and what I stand for. For instance, I’m someone that buys designer as well as vintage clothes.’

Self-assurance denotes people contributing to brand-related content in order to receive other members’ recognition and gain self-assurance (cf. Lampel & Bhalla 2007). For instance, positive feedback for having accurately answered a brand-related question makes someone feel appreciated and respected for who they are and what they are capable of, and subsequently boosts that person’s self-confidence. ‘If people post that they see you doing the right things, it makes me feel proud and happy’, one interviewee (male, 19) said. Another interviewee (male, 28), who was also a member of the Volkswagen brand community, stated that: ‘Most members often give feedback, and if you are the person to have given the answer that has brought them back on track, well, that surely gives satisfaction, then you have done it right somehow or other.’

Integration and social interaction

Like personal identity, the integration and social interaction motivation is also found to drive both the contributing and the creating COBRA types. Regarding contributing to brand-related content, the motivation covers three sub-motivations: social interaction, social identity and helping.

Social interaction denotes people contributing to brand-related social media platforms in order to meet like-minded others, and interact and talk with them about a particular brand. ‘I am a member of several brand profiles on Hyves because I want to share certain interests and get to know people who have the same interests’, an interviewee (male, 29) said. Members of virtual brand communities repeatedly mentioned having developed long-lasting friendships with the brand as common denominator: ‘What started off as purely technique-based conversations has turned into one big circle of friends helping each other, even though most of us haven’t actually met one another’ (male, 37). In contrast, relationships built on brand profiles on social networking sites were reported less often and appear less profound (cf. Antheunis 2009). Indeed, such brand profiles may serve a function as masked online dating sites (cf. Ellison *et al.* 2006): ‘What’s more fun than a nice girl with the same passion?’ (male, 29).

Social identity as a motivation to contribute to brand-related content refers to people noting a ‘critical demarcation between users of their brand and users of other brands’ (Muñiz & O’Guinn 2001, p. 418). A common passion – the brand – makes people feel a strong connection with one another, and generates a bond: ‘What?!?’ They also like red lipstick/Calvé peanut butter!’ (female, 25), and ‘you do have, like, a bond, and when I go shopping with friends who also like Allstars, it’s always much more fun’ (female, 16). One interviewee (male, 39) expressed this aptly when he said that ‘We VW diesel engine lovers are just a different sort of people. We’re not happy-go-lucky folks like those youngsters on the other VW forum.’

Helping denotes contributing to brand-related content to help and get help from each other. For instance, people ask others all sorts of brand-related questions: Where’s that Converse store located? What’s your favourite Ben & Jerry’s flavour? How can I solve this problem with my Volkswagen? Reciprocity plays an important role here, as illustrated by the words of a 39-year-old male member of the Volkswagen brand community: ‘I hate cleaning my car, but there are guys that really enjoy doing it. So I ask: how much would it cost for you to do it for me – at any rate it’s cheaper than when some company does it. And this guy has credits from his work, you know, that’s the way you should look at it. One time there’s money involved, another time there isn’t; nothing’s compulsory, everything’s possible. Purely voluntary.’

In addition, when brand community members put their heads together over the brakes of a specific brand of car, or discuss the (dis)advantages of a new product line of a childcare brand, this active group of brand community members ‘adds value to the product’ (male, 45).

Entertainment

As mentioned, the entertainment motivation is present in all three COBRA types. Within the contributing COBRA type, entertainment mainly covers the enjoyment motivation and relaxation motivations; pas-time and escapism motivations were not mentioned.

Within contributing, enjoyment is reflected in such statements as ‘It’s great fun being in a group of people with whom you can go on and on about your passion’ (male, 29). A young mother (28) explained why she contributes to the Zwitsal fan page on Hyves: ‘I like sharing those experi-

ences. It's always fun to talk to other mothers about baby products and give each other tips and all.' Yet another interviewee (male, 19), a member of the Volkswagen brand community, stated 'that's so much fun, someone tries something out, others do that too, and then they stumble upon a problem, and then they put in on the forum, and then we all start trying to tackle the problem'. Thus, people seem to highly enjoy talking about common interests and sharing brand-related tips and tricks.

Motivations for creating brand-related content

The creating COBRA type is driven by four motivations – personal identity, integration and social interaction, empowerment, and entertainment – some of which cover several sub-motivations.

Personal identity

Personal identity involves several self-related and identity-related motivations, and was also found to drive the contributing COBRA types. As regards to creating brand-related content, it covers the same three sub-motivations: self-presentation, self-expression and self-assurance.

As an example of self-presentation, one interviewee (female, 20) uploaded a picture of a Puma tattoo she had on her belly to show off, impress others and present herself as the 'greatest living Puma fan'. In her words: 'Well, other people upload pictures of their shoes, but everybody has those shoes, and I think I just wanted to impress others with that photo, because surely nobody has a Puma tattoo that big on that spot. I thought: I'll show them how crazy I am about Puma.'

As far as self-expression is concerned, a brand can be used to express and shape one's identity and/or personality. One interviewee (male, 20) hosts a website on which he writes reviews about Nintendo, for example about the newest games or consoles. He explained: 'It's more than a hobby: I set it up from scratch. Nintendo is everything to me.' As such, he uses the brand and the website that he set up to cherish that brand to express and shape his own identity.

As an illustration of the self-assurance motivation, one interviewee (male, 17) Photoshopped a picture of himself wearing Björn Borg boxer shorts into a one of him wearing HEMA (a popular but not very fashionable chain of Dutch department stores) boxer shorts – an item of clothing

that does not actually exist. He uploaded this picture to the HEMA Hyves page. He explained: ‘I always like it when someone sends me a message saying something like “Nice pictures you’ve got there, dude!” – especially since I’m trying to get the knack of Photoshop.’

Integration and social interaction

As mentioned, the integration and social interaction motivation drives both the contributing and the creating COBRA types. As regards creating brand-related content, the motivation covers three sub-motivations: social interaction, social identity and social pressure (as opposed to helping in the contributing COBRA type).

Regarding the social interaction motivation, one interviewee (female, 38) said she had uploaded a picture she had created and that she liked very much, because she was ‘very curious about people’s reactions’. Another interviewee (female, 25) uploads brand-related content because she likes to ‘share information, to acquaint people with a product, event, action or whatever’.

By uploading brand-related content, people can also confirm that they are part of a distinct group of brand enthusiasts, which generates a sense of shared social identity. ‘It’s nice to be part of a group of Nintendo enthusiasts’, one interviewee stated (male, 20). Another interviewee (male, 19) uploads pictures of himself wearing all sorts of Adidas clothing. Asked why, he stated: ‘If you share a picture with others, you have a goal anyhow, you want something with that picture ... In my case it was to show others that I’m wearing Adidas too.’

The social pressure motivation in the creating COBRA type refers to people uploading brand-related content because other people do. When people see that others have uploaded pictures showing their sneakers, car or favourite ice cream, they are stimulated to do the same. As one interviewee (male, 17) explained: ‘It’s just fun when you’re on, for instance, the Björn Borg Hyves page and you see all the pictures that people have taken of themselves, and, well, I just join in.’

Empowerment

The empowerment motivation specifically relates to the creating COBRA type. The interviewees who articulated this motivation are brand ambassadors – people who display their enthusiasm for a brand and, importantly,

enjoy convincing others that the brand is worth using or purchasing. For instance, one interviewee (male, 20) said that he thinks it is 'very interesting that people buy as a result of what I write; that's really cool'. In addition, social media have given consumers 'a voice amidst the whirlwind of information and advertising' (Daugherty *et al.* 2008, para. 1). They enable people to reach and influence not only other customers, but also companies. The activities of one interviewee (male, 17) are illustrative of such customer empowerment: he is trying to mobilise other members of the Hyves profile of a department store to persuade it to add a toasted ham and cheese sandwich (a *tosti*) to its food assortment.

Entertainment

As mentioned, the entertainment motivation is present in all three COBRA types. Within the creating COBRA type, entertainment mainly covers the enjoyment and pastime motivations. The relaxation and the escapism motivation were not mentioned.

As with the other two COBRA types, enjoyment is an unpretending motivation: one interviewee (female, 38) uploads pictures to a Ben & Jerry's fan page on Hyves because it is 'just fun; nothing less and nothing more'. Another interviewee (male, 17) said that he uploads pictures 'especially for my own satisfaction. Just because I like it.' Pastime was mentioned by one interviewee (female, 16), who said that she predominantly uploads brand-related pictures when she is bored and cannot think of anything else to do.

Conclusion and discussion

The present study provides a first comprehensive understanding of consumers' motivations for engaging in consumers' online brand-related activities (COBRAs). This understanding enables marketers and advertisers to effectively anticipate COBRAs, and evoke the desired gratifications and subsequent effects. In the following sections, we discuss, per COBRA type, how our results relate and contribute to the existing body of generic and brand-related social media use literature.

Consuming brand-related content

Consuming is the COBRA type with the lowest level of brand-related activeness. Our study indicates that it is driven by three motivational dimensions: information, entertainment and remuneration.

The information motivation has been detected in prior general (e.g. Shao 2009) and brand-related social media motivation research, and functions commonly as an umbrella concept. For instance, Schindler and Bickart (2005) found that ‘information’ is a driver of reading product reviews. The information sub-motivations surveillance and inspiration were not identified previously by studies on brand-related social media use.

Like information, the entertainment motivation is generally considered as a broad, unspecified motivational concept (e.g. Schindler & Bickart 2005; Shao 2009). Unlike other general and explicitly brand-related social media motivation studies that find entertainment to drive consuming (e.g. Goldsmith & Horowitz 2006; Kaye 2007), we differentiate between enjoyment, relaxation and pastime: all are found to drive the consumption of brand-related content on social media.

People also consume brand-related content because they expect remuneration: a trip, a pair of the latest Adidas sneakers, or simply value for money. This motivation has been found in earlier studies on consuming brand-related content on social media (Hennig-Thurau *et al.* 2005; Goldsmith & Horowitz 2006).

Contributing to brand-related content

Consumers’ contributions to brand-related content – conversing with others about brands, rating brand-related videos – are driven by three motivations: personal identity, integration and social interaction, and entertainment.

Unlike prior brand-related social media motivation studies, we distinguish between the personal identity sub-motivations self-expression, self-presentation and self-assurance. While the self-expression motivation so far remained undetected by specifically brand-related literature, it was identified in general social media literature (Dholakia *et al.* 2004; Sangwan 2005; Bumgarner 2007). Self-presentation is solely mentioned in general social media studies (Hars & Ou 2001; Boyd 2008); prior to our

endeavour, no specifically brand-related study identified this motivation. Conversely, self-assurance has been found in both general (e.g. Park *et al.* 2009) and brand-related studies, such as Jeppesen and Frederiksen's (2006) examination of people's motivations to participate in firm-hosted user communities.

The sub-motivations – social interaction, social identity and helping – that form the integration and social interaction motivation commonly feature in both general and brand-related social media motivations literature. Social interaction, for instance, was found by McKenna and Bargh (1999), but also by Popp *et al.*'s (2008) examination of virtual brand community motivations; social identity was identified by Wang and Fesenmaier (2003) and Boyd (2008), but also in Hsu and Liao's (2007) study on the motivations for brand community participation; and helping as a motivation to contribute to virtual communities was identified by Wasko and Faraj (2000), but also by Popp *et al.* (2008). Their 'added value' dimension resembles our conceptualisation of 'helping': the collective effort of a community to solve brand-related problems adds value to a brand.

Similar to the integration and social interaction motivation, entertainment has been found in earlier general and brand-related social media studies. Park *et al.* (2009), for instance, found that the use of social networking sites is partly driven by entertainment, and Popp *et al.* (2008) argue that entertainment-related motivations, as a driver of virtual brand community participation, are part of their previously mentioned added value dimension.

Creating brand-related content

Creating is the COBRA type with the highest level of brand-related activeness. It is driven by the same three motivational dimensions as contributing: personal identity, integration and social interaction, and entertainment. In addition, we found that creating is also driven by an empowerment motivation that, notably, then, is present only in the COBRA type that requires the highest level of brand activeness.

Within the creating COBRA type, personal identity covers the same sub-motivations as within the contributing COBRA type: self-expression, self-presentation and self-assurance. Self-expression has been found to drive generic and brand-related online activities, for instance writing

weblogs (e.g. Papacharissi 2007) and product reviews (Bronner & De Hoog 2011). Self-presentation is a familiar motivation in the literature on creating both generic (Nov 2007; Daugherty *et al.* 2008) and specifically brand-related social media content: Berthon *et al.* (2008), for instance, identify self-promotion as a major driver of creating user-generated advertisements. Likewise, self-assurance is a common motivation in social media literature (Hennig-Thurau *et al.* 2004; Papacharissi 2007).

The composition of the integration and social interaction motivation for the creating COBRA type differs from that of the contributing type: social pressure replaces the helping sub-motivation. In the context of creating, social interaction is mainly a way of eliciting conversations with and comments from others. It was detected in prior generic social media (e.g. Daugherty *et al.* 2008) and specifically brand-related studies: Bronner and De Hoog (2011) found that people that write product reviews often do so to yield conversations. While social identity is often found in research on people's motivations for creating general social media content (e.g. Nardi *et al.* 2004; Bumgarner 2007), a 'sense of belonging' was not previously found to motivate the creating of brand-related content.

Specifically driving the creating COBRA type, the empowerment motivation appears only in COBRA literature. Berthon *et al.* (2008) and Bronner and De Hoog (2011) show that consumers are very much aware of their influence over other people and the collective power that they, through virtual brand communities, may exert over product owners (cf. Cova & Pace 2006). The idea that one can change other people's perceptions, get them to buy a product or get a company to change course is an important motivator for them to create COBRAs.

An unspecified motivation in most social media motivations studies (e.g. Stöckl *et al.* 2007), entertainment in our study covers several sub-motivations. While creating general social media content is driven by a wide array of entertainment-related motivations (Courtois *et al.* 2009), creating brand-related content appears to be driven by enjoyment alone (Berthon *et al.* 2008).

Practical implications

The present study makes the case that different brand-related activities on social media platforms are driven by different motivations, and in doing

so it provides valuable insights into consumer behaviour on social media-enabled environments.

Knowing that different sets of motivations account for different COBRAs enables brand managers to anticipate and stimulate consumers' online brand-related activities. For instance, knowing that creating brand-related content is partially driven by motivations of personal identity makes it possible for brand managers to facilitate such motivations. They can, for instance, set up campaigns that enable consumers to adapt brand manifestations to their personal preferences so as to employ these to show others who they are, what they like and what they are capable of.

As such, our study contributes to brand managers' effective employment of brand-related activities as successful marketing and branding tools. It provides managers with insights into the mechanisms underlying brand-related behaviours and, ultimately, enables them to direct their outcomes – for instance, following which motivations and behaviours a brand's image can be developed in a certain direction, and how certain motivations and activities may be employed to enhance brand attitudes or increase purchase intentions. As such, our study complements Burmann's (2010) recently established notion of 'user generated branding' (or UGB): 'the strategic and operative management of brand related user generated content in order to achieve brand goals' (p. 2).

Limitations

Like many U&G studies (Ruggiero 2000), this study relied on self-reports. Self-reports, however, are based on the interviewee's personal memory, and people usually do not consciously think of, let alone reflect upon, such innate mechanisms as motivations. Interviewees, it is argued (Schwarz 1999), therefore may experience difficulties articulating their motivations. Tadjewski (2006), in contrast, posits that interviewing people enables more hidden and obscure motivations to surface. In agreement with this, during our IM-based interviews we observed no evidence of social desirability or inability to reflect upon one's motivational drivers. All interviewees proved willing and able to articulate their motivations. This confirms Stieger and Göritz's (2006) conclusion that the risk of attaining false responses in IM interviews was small. Yet the use of IM may also

give cause for concern. First, during interviews interviewees may engage in other activities (e.g. playing online games or chatting with other people) and thus may become less involved or focused; second, determining that an interviewee actually is who he or she claims to be is hard, if not impossible, when using IM. On the other hand, however, IM's lack of visual cues, the familiarity of the own home or office, and the fact that people engaging in social media use are almost by definition familiar with IM, encouraged people to speak their minds freely and without the restrictions of face-to-face interviewing.

Directions for future research

This study was initiated to shed light on people's motivations to engage in COBRAs. This theme opens up several directions for future research. First, while we now have a basic understanding of what governs people to engage with brands online, we remain unaware of what characterises those people in relation to motivations and behaviours. For instance, do higher-educated people contribute more to brand-related content than people with a lower level of education? Are there differences with regard to gender and age? And how do psychological characteristics such as extroversion and emotional stability (cf. Correa *et al.* 2010) relate to people's motivations to consume, contribute to or create brand-related content? Quantitative research should be carried out to address these questions.

Second, while our study sheds light on some consumer-side antecedents of COBRAs, it did not elaborate on its brand-side antecedents and the interrelations between motivations, COBRAs and brands. For instance, some brands may elicit more creating behaviours, while others may predominantly elicit consuming behaviours. Research in the field of electronic word-of-mouth (e.g. Walsh *et al.* 2009) suggests that there are differences between brands vis-à-vis high or low brand equity, but effectively there is little knowledge about the individual differences that make a brand more, or less, susceptible to certain COBRAs. Future quantitative research could potentially build on Pitt *et al.*'s (2006) endeavour to develop a typology of brand dimensions for brand management in an open source setting.

If performed, the aforementioned research directions will lead to a clearer understanding of the significance of brand-related social media use to marketing, advertising and branding. Such research calls for much larger samples than that of the current study. Interviewing a relatively small sample of people engaging in COBRAs, however, enabled us to methodically and thoroughly explore their motivations to do so. As a result, we gained in-depth, meaningful and valuable insights into, and a comprehensive overview of, the motivations that govern COBRAs. As such, this study's results serve as the qualitative foundation for quantitative follow-up studies.

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